



# Trails, Tales & Old Roads of Austin and Travis County

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Sunday, February 7, 2016

## Texas Ranger Dick Preece's "Comanche Trail"

*"... A few miles from the Preece ranch lay the southern terminus of the bloody Comanche Trail with its northern end being seven hundred miles away in Western Kansas. The Comanches still claimed three-fourths of Texas as their hunting ground. Once they raided Austin, slain and ridden off with Lone Star flags waving mockingly from their saddle-horns.. On the Comanche Trail grandfather perfected scouting as a somewhat forbidden art. Forbidden because his father mindful of the Indian danger, issued stern instructions for his younger boys to pot quails and jackrabbits elsewhere .. As the years went by .. The Comanche Trail faded. But a spur of the Texas Trail, which connected with the Chisholm Trail of the the longhorns ran near his ranch. He became one of the main suppliers of horses for the big drives of Texas cattle to Kansas..."*

A number of years ago I was able to track down and purchase a copy of *Real West* (Volume VII, Number 38, Nov. 1964) that had the article "My



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Grandfather, Dick Preece", written by his grandson Harold Preece. That article, and the quote above, set me on a quest to research Dick Preece, his time in Texas, Comanche trails near his ranch, and the spur of the Chisholm Trail near his ranch.

While this is not intended as a genealogy piece, a bit of genealogy research was needed to try to sort through land records associated with the ranch. And sorting through the Preece family genealogy can be confusing. There are variations in the surname spelling: Preece vs. Priest vs. Price; references that use first names, some middle, some nick names (Dick Preece; Little Will; etc.). And there are two sets of seniors and juniors: William Martin Senior & Junior; Richard Lincoln Preece Senior & Junior; plus yet *another* William Martin Preece son of Richard Lincoln Preece. It makes for a real challenge sorting through land records, and through family trees that sometimes just simply get it wrong.

So with apologies to any genealogy I may have gotten wrong, here's a brief history of Dick Preece, Texas Ranger.

[Click here for a link to map with key locations in this blog](#)

Maps and photos are from Google Maps; Texas GLO; Portal to Texas History; Austin History Center; Denver Public Library Digital Collections

## 1838, Coming to Texas; Bull Creek Gets a Name

Among the early Anglo settlers to the hill country west of Austin were William Martin Preece (1800-1871), wife Mary Elizabeth Giddens (various spellings; 1810-1878), and son Richard Lincoln Preece (1833-1906) -- AKA Dick Preece. While Harold Preece's article says William Martin Preece brought his family to Texas about 1838 and settled in the Bull Creek area, William Martin Preece and wife Mary are listed as having been buried in the Singleton Family Cemetery, also known as Post Oak Bend Cemetery, on the Colorado River about 12 miles southeast of Marble Falls [2]. So Dick Preece's early years honing his "scouting" skills may have been on his father's ranch closer to that area.

A popular story associated with the Preece family is that the name "Bull Creek" is often attributed to the killing of a -- or even "the last" -- male buffalo on Bull Creek, either by William Martin Preece, or by his son Dick. In his article, "My Grandfather, Dick Preece", Harold claims it was his great-grandfather, William Martin Preece, while other sources cite Dick Preece.

## 1849 - 1861, Texas Ranger Years; Preece Ranch; Comanche Trail

Harold Preece's article says that "At fifteen, grandfather could cut sign on Comanches when other

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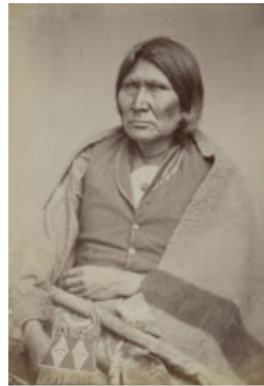
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Proposed rezoning of Austin Oaks to a PUD, My Letter to the City's Case Manager

I'm writing in reference to the Austin Oaks PUD rezoning request. I have lived in the area, about a mile from Spicewood Springs, for about 2...



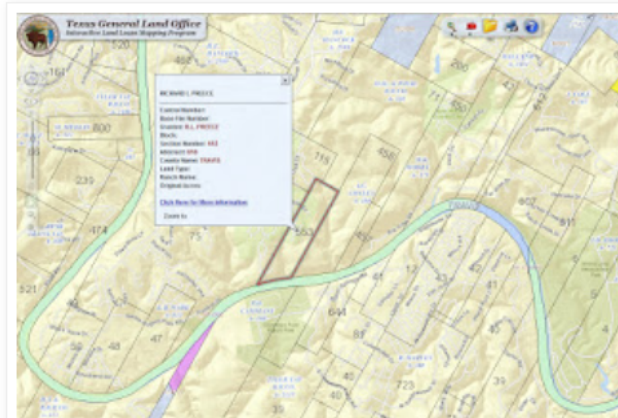
frontiersmen [could not]. Under the tutelage of .. Big Foot Wallace, he developed into the best shot of the Travis County hills" and by the time he was 16 (1849) he was an "unenlisted volunteer" with Ranger patrols, and officially joining the Texas Rangers at age 22; about 1855. Dick Preece's younger brother, William Martin Preece Jr. (1838-1870), also served as a Texas Ranger.



Chief Horseback ca. 1869-74

Harold says that in the mid-1850s, before the Civil War, "From the Colorado River to the San Saba the powerful Comanches struck, with its war parties enlarged by bands of Kiowas, Apaches, and Caddoes" and names Comanche Chief "Horse Back" (also spelled "Horseback") as arch enemy of Dick Preece. While the Penateka Comanche were the prevalent band in the Hill Country, Chief Horseback seems to have been a Nokoni with a more northerly range. Find A Grave's entry for Chief Horseback says "His younger days were filled with raiding and terrorizing white settlers. He led a great raid into Texas in 1864, going as far as Gainesville". Gainesville, TX is about 65 miles north of Fort Worth. So any dealings between Dick Preece and Chief Horseback were likely not in the immediate Travis County Hill Country the Preece's called home.

But the location of Dick Preece's ranch suggests he probably *did* have opportunity to deal with the Penateka Comanche closer to home. By 1859 Dick Preece is acquiring land of his own. The General Land Office records show that in 1859 Richard Lincoln Preece patented 160 acres along the Colorado River, in the area of what we now associate with River Place / Steiner Ranch subdivision, and across from today's Commons Ford Ranch Park [2].



On the north river bank, on or very near the southeast corner of his ranch was located Santa Monica Springs. Brune (*Springs of Texas*) says Santa Monica Springs were once the basis for Comanche and Tonkawa Indian campgrounds.



Texas Ranger  
Dick Preece's  
"Comanche Trail"

" .. A few miles from the Preece ranch lay the southern terminus of the bloody Comanche Trail with its northern end being seven ...



The Other Montopolis  
"Executive Summary" In the history of Travis County there have been two settlements named Montopolis. The most recent Mo...



Tracing native trails across Austin

This is a post of an article that ran in the Austin American Statesman, October 24, 2015, by Michael Barnes, about work I've done on old...







Santa Monica Springs ca. 1890

Gelo (*Comanche Land and Ever Has Been*) called them "a watering place" for the Comanche. The springs are only about 4 miles south of Comanche Peak (near today's Oasis restaurant on Lake Travis) and Defeat

Hollow, the location of an encounter between Joel Harris, an early settler to Hudson Bend, and Indians, probably Comanche. As the name of the Commons Ford Ranch Park suggests, the springs were probably located near a ford of the Colorado (early maps also show a ferry nearby). So Dick Preece's ranch could very well have had a Comanche trail running through it, south from Comanche Peak, crossing the Colorado at Santa Monica Springs.

So might this be the "bloody Comanche Trail" about which Harold Preece wrote "its northern end being seven hundred miles away in Western Kansas". Probably not. Any Comanche trail running through the Preece Ranch, located on the banks of the Colorado River, probably followed the Colorado River itself, northwest to its headwaters; the Comancheria of the Penateka Comanche, the southern most band of the Comanche that frequented the Texas Hill Country.

It was after all the headwaters of the Colorado River around what is now Colorado City, TX where the expedition of Colonel John H. Moore headed on its punitive strike against the Penateka Comanche in their own homeland in 1840 in revenge for the sacking of the town of Linnville earlier that same year.

Maybe Harold's description of a trail through the ranch originating in Western Kansas was a bit of artistic license, or a conflation of Dick Preece's dealings with Nokoni Comanche Chief Horseback, the Chisholm Trail (which did indeed run into Kansas), and known Comanche trails around the ranch, albeit probably related to the Penateka trails northwest up the river.

## 1861-1865, Civil War



Moore expedition history marker in Colorado City, TX



The McGill Ford: Indian Crossing on the Colorado  
There is a Texas historic marker at the old Charles Johnson home west of where MOPAC crosses the Colorado. The marker reads: Erected...

### Bull Creek History

Archaeological investigations of the Bull Creek area show a long history of utilization by humans. One study sponsored by the Bull Creek Fou...



### Wagon Ruts on Bull Creek?

The photo here shows what are probably old wagon ruts in the bedrock at one of the many Bull Creek crossings of the road that would become L...





During the Civil War, the Preece family, like many in Texas[3], opposed secession from the Union, but secede Texas did. After secession, pro-Union men were being discharged from the Texas Rangers, and this included Dick Preece and brother William Martin Jr.

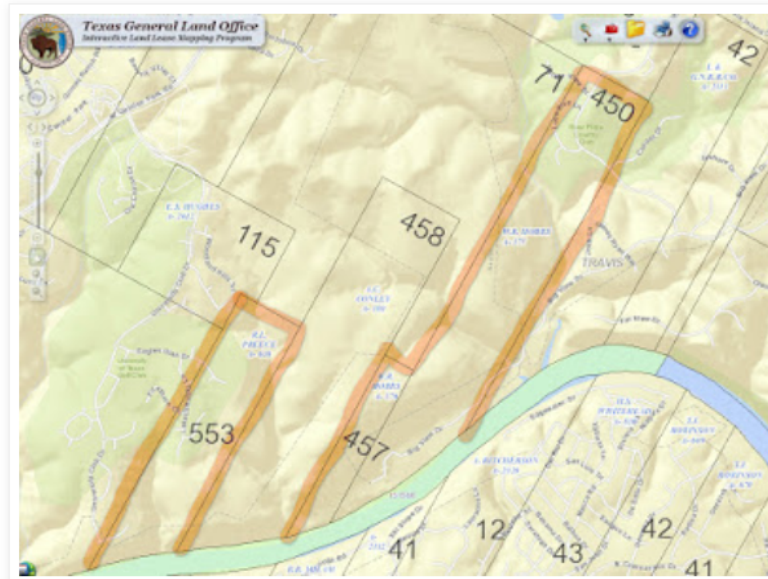
Refusing to join the confederacy, Dick Preece found himself a fugitive; Harold Preece says the remote location of the ranch and "caves" of Bull Creek provided a base for Union loyalists resisting the Confederacy. Dick Preece served in an outfit called the "Texas Mountain Eagles", a Union guerrilla outfit fighting the Confederacy which became the First Texas Cavalry of the Union army (Zelade p.166), a fact inscribed on his tombstone.

Time and again, Harold says, Confederate irregulars invaded the hills west of Austin looking for boys and men to conscript, and cattle to help feed the Confederate cause. But time and again, Dick Preece, "chieftain of the Unionist irregulars", stopped them. Harold called the area we now know as Bull Creek an "unsurrendering patch of the United States", and Dick Preece the "very symbol of the Loyalist counter rebellion"

Dick Preece's exploits as a guerrilla fighter against the confederacy were documented in another Harold Preece article, "Eagle of the Mountains: The true story of Ranger Dick Preece, who challenged Comanche and outlaw", *Texas Rangers*, Dec 1949. I'm still trying to find a copy of this magazine!

## 1867 - 1884, Chisholm Trail Years

At the close of the Civil War, one of Texas' best economic resources during reconstruction was an abundance of longhorn cattle that could be sold in Kansas and other markets to the north. The Chisholm Trail was in use from about 1867 to 1884. A feeder branch of the Chisholm Trail is said to have passed by the Preece ranch. And during this period of cattle drives, the Preece family ranch was growing.



Commons Ford Ranch Metropolitan Park, Austin, Texas

Ever wondered about the history of Commons Ford Ranch Metropolitan Park, for example Why is it called "Commons Ford"? Was it a pu...



Historic San Antonio-El Paso Road

Today's post is about the San Antonio-El Paso Road. While not in Travis County per se, there was a trail out of Austin that connected wi...

Mount Bonnell, Indian Trail

Note: This is based on a write-up I did for Wikipedia about Mount Bonnell, hence the similarity! A historical marker was placed at Mount B...



GLO records show that in 1869 a William Martin Preece (and my guess is this was Dick Preece's brother, not father) acquired two additional surveys along the Colorado, shown here marked sections 457 & 450. The survey marked section 553 is the one acquired by Dick Preece in 1859. For reference, notice on this map that the River Place Country Club is located on the northern end of section 450.

Zelade (p.166) says the Preece ranch was served by the post office at Running Brushy (now Cedar Park), run by Harriet Cluck. George and Harriet Cluck settled at Running Brushy with their family in the early 1870s having returned from a cattle drive on the Chisholm Trail. Running Brushy post office was established in 1874. George and Harriet are both buried at the Cedar Park Cemetery on land set aside from their farm for a family burial ground, and deeded to the community in 1912. The old Cedar Park Cemetery provides a good reference point for the location of the original Running Brushy community.

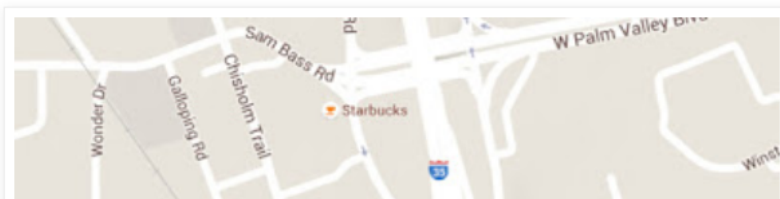


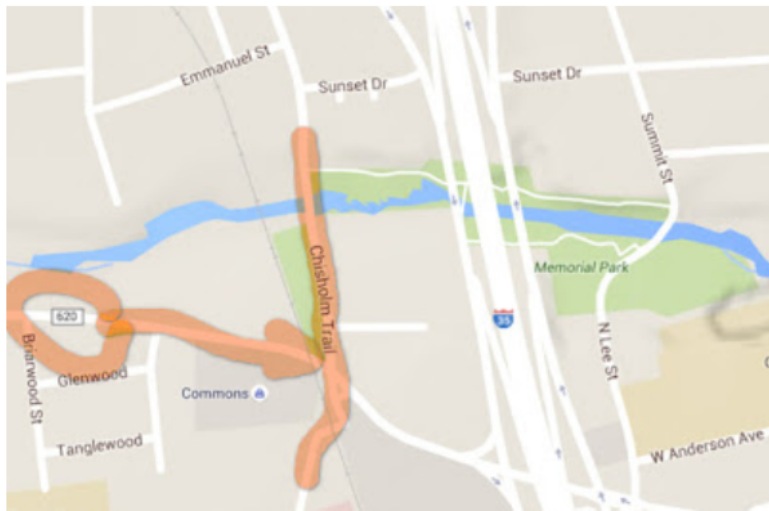
Route from Preece Ranch across Jollyville Plateau; USGS 1896 map

As Harold Preece's article says, "a spur of the Texas Trail, which connected with the Chisholm Trail of the the longhorns ran near his ranch. He became one of the main suppliers of horses for the big drives of Texas cattle to Kansas...". What would have been the route of a trail from Dick Preece's ranch connecting with the Chisholm Trail?

When you drive R.M. 620 today, you are likely on the feeder trail Dick Preece would have used to connect his ranch with the old Chisholm Trail. If we look at modern day map, R.M. 620 (R.M. stands for "Ranch to

Market"; an indicator of that roads use even in more modern times) runs from near the Preece Ranch all the way to the Chisholm Trail crossing of Brushy Creek in Round Rock, near where the actual "round rock" is located. R.M. 620's route is largely determined by a geographical feature of that area: the Jollyville Plateau, a flat, level land bridge of sorts providing a path through the canyon lands created by Colorado River, Bull Creek and West Bull Creek.



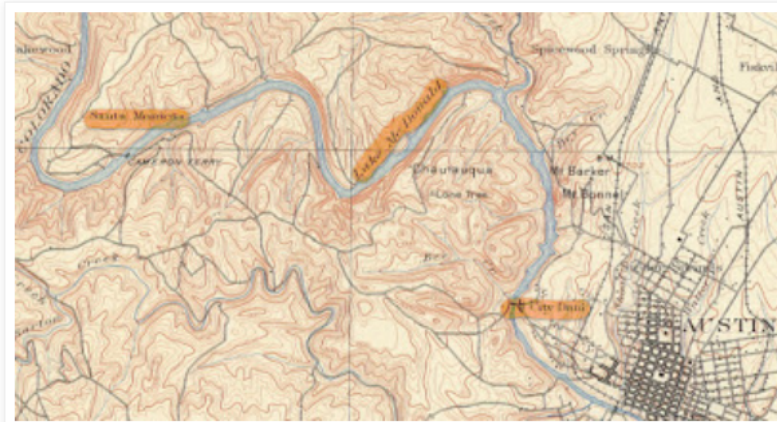


R.M. 620 intersects with Chisholm Trail near its crossing of Brushy Creek

## 1893, First Colorado Dam; Family on the Move

Of Dick Preece's twelve children one was David Preece (Harold Preece's father), born 1871, and as an old man he wrote about the family's life (some of his writings are archived at the Austin History Center; see also Zelade). David Preece writes about the coming of the first dam across the Colorado River, completed in 1893 saying "... smart town lawyers, crooked as a dog's hind leg, swarmed the hills talking about the dam to be built across the Colorado that would flood our range. They said we'd better sell our river bottom holdings while we could still get something for them".

By 1893 the 60 foot high Austin Dam, AKA The Great Granite Dam, was completed creating what was known as Lake McDonald. The dam later failed in 1900 during torrential rains. But the location of the dam, Lake McDonald and the Preece ranch can be seen on the USGS 1896 topographic map. On this map, as a reference point, Santa Monica Springs was on the banks of the Colorado River at or on Dick





Preece's section (553 on GLO map) of the ranch.

A letter written by Louise Preece (Harold Preece's sister, David Preece's daughter), dated July 2, 1968, may be talking about this period in family history; notes in parenthesis are hers [4]:

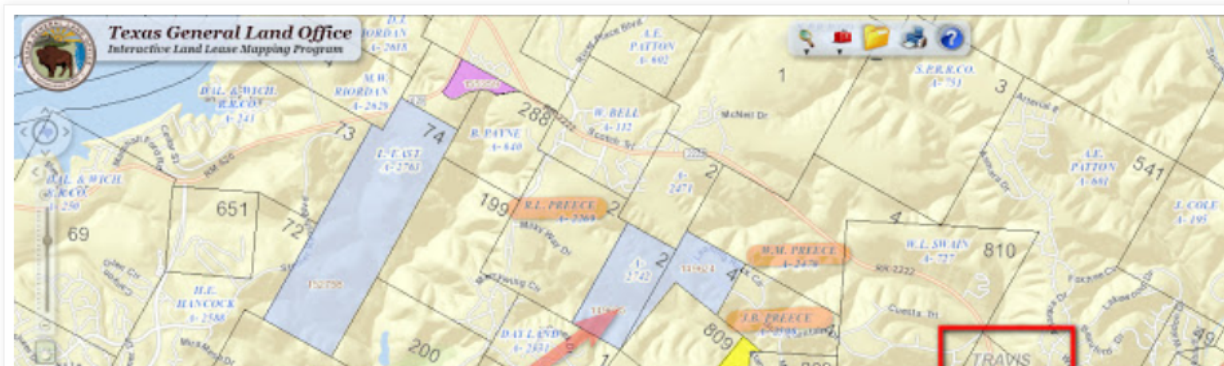
They had moved (dad's people) from the Colorado River around Bee Cave (near Austin) to Bull Creek. They let their lands on the Colorado go, but they could not take those first graves. Today most of the stones are gone and some are lying around broken up by the cattle of our once land. It is now Steiner's (sic) Ranch. There were such quaint stones too--it was a large cemetery.

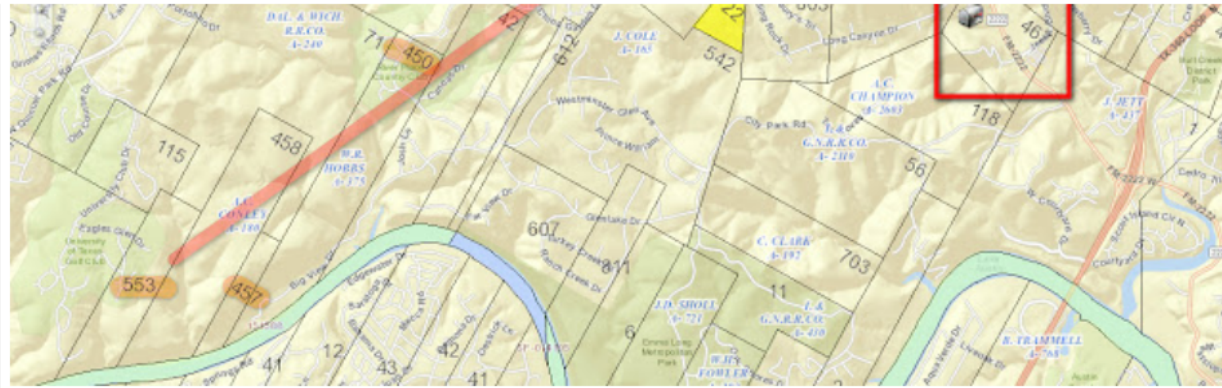
From her reference to Steiner Ranch (and at the time of the writing it was still a *ranch*, not the subdivision of the same name as today) it is clear she is talking about Dick Preece's ranch on the land patented in 1859, along with the additional land acquired by William Martin Preece in 1869, all fronting the Colorado. As the crow flies it is about 4 miles from the Preece ranch to Bee Cave, and while today there are no crossings of the Colorado to make a direct route to Bee Caves, based on old maps a more direct route via fords or ferry was possible.

But what of the cemetery? Were there Preece family buried on Preece ranch, or could she be confusing the Post Oak Bend Cemetery where William Martin Preece Sr. and wife Mary are listed as having been buried (but is not near Steiner Ranch). Unknown.[5]

So fearing loss of land due to the rising waters of a dam across the Colorado, the Preece family sold their holdings along the Colorado and moved to land on "Bull Creek", actually West Bull Creek. GLO records show a variety of tracts of land owned by the Preece family up and down R.M. 2222 which follows West Bull Creek.

In the map below, sections 553, 457 and 450 are the original Colorado river front ranches; other Preece family holdings (not meant to be a comprehensive list) are marked in orange; the mailbox symbol in a red box shows the location of the Preece cemetery where Dick Preece and others of the family are buried. So all in all, not a distant move, but as family history indicates, one from Colorado river frontage east to the West Bull Creek area.





## 1906, The Preece Cemetery

After his death in 1906 Dick Preece was buried along West Bull Creek, at the Preece Cemetery, on Vaught Ranch Rd. Austin, TX, just off RM 2222 [6].

The letter written by Harold Preece's sister, Louise Preece, dated July 2, 1968, provides a fascinating read about the Preece Cemetery [4]. The "big dams" referenced here are the current Highland Lake dams which did indeed require relocation of some cemeteries.

In the 1930's the big dams were built, and the descendants of the pioneers were told they would have to get out as the land was condemned. The cemeteries were moved, thank goodness; but our Preece cemetery was not touched. It is on Bull Creek, just below the site where great Uncle Wayne Pulaski Preece built his house and donated the land for the cemetery. It is said that at night Uncle Wayne would leave his grave and walk cross the wide front porch and enter a little side room where he slept. I heard foot steps one night (don't smile at this, for such things are known to happen in our family); The sound of the foot steps went across the porch and entered the side room; then the footsteps returned and went down toward the cemetery from which they came. We were all sleeping in the same room. I wondered why no one said anything. Years later it occurred to me that



Richard L. Preece 1833-1906, Preece Cemetery

perhaps I as the only one who heard them) I never did mention it to anyone then. The cemetery was on a limestone embankment, and it is said that one or two parsons (sic) dug up for reburial had turned to stone. A geologist later said the bodies had ossified--or at any rate, they did change because of the effect of the limestone on them. Mother said she must never be buried there, as she wanted to be able to rise on the Judgment Day. She died in 1972, and is buried at the foot of the mountains, in Austin Memorial Park, where my father was buried in 1956 with a WOW service. He had hunted on the land which later became a cemetery, and said he wanted to lie there. On his gravestone are the words, "I shall I look unto to the hills from which cometh my help." Mother who hated the hills has on her gravestone, "I shall not pass this way again." Uncle Wayne's place was built on the site of a Comanche hunting ground. The early pioneers there, including my people, fought the Comanche's (sic); and one Giddens cousin was killed. We children used to pick up arrow heads, and my uncle Byrd (another Richard Lincoln Preece) found an Indian grave in which the body had been buried in a sitting position. It was not on our place, though. The body was that of an Indian of course.

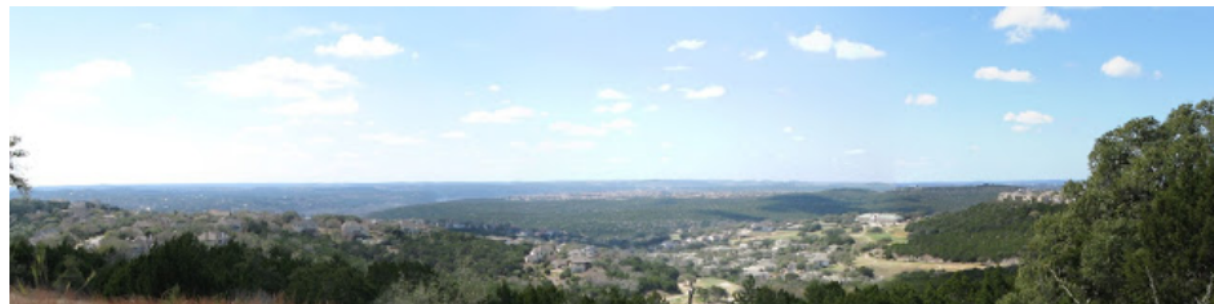
## Today, The Legacy of Dick Preece

If you are interested in learning more about the Preece family and their early days in Travis County, the University of Texas' Briscoe Center for American History is home to the "Richard Lincoln Preece Papers, 1859-1919", which comprises correspondence, printed material, legal and financial documents, etc. pertaining to Dick Preece's experiences as a soldier serving in the Civil War and as a rancher following the war. ([click here for The Guide to the Richard Lincoln Preece Papers, 1859-1919](#)).

For safe keeping I donated my copy of the Real West magazine with Harold Preece's article to the Briscoe Center. An on-line copy is available at [Internet Archive](#).

Additional materials are also available at the Austin History Center.

## More Photos







Hill Country view toward the Colorado River including parts of Dick Preece's ranch.



A view of the Colorado River (Lake Austin) about 1.75 miles downstream from Santa Monica Springs



Pecan bottoms like these at Woodland Park at River Place, just east of the Preece Ranch, would have been ideal Comanche camp grounds providing water, shelter and nuts





Entrance to the Preece Cemetery on R.M. 2222



Panorama of the Preece Cemetery with Richard Lincoln Preece's tombstone center with flag

## Footnotes

[1] Priest is an alternate spelling of Preece. The Find A Grave website has two entries for William Martin. See Find A Grave website entry for William Martin Priest and also Find A Grave website entry for William Martin Preece; same person, same cemetery.

[2] As I've noted in another post, "Commons" is likely a corruption of "Cammans" as in P.H. Cammans, the original owner of that tract of land where the park is today located.

[3] Many counties in the Texas hill country voted against secession, e.g. Travis, Williamson, Burnet, Mason, Gillespie, Blanco

[4] This letter by Louise Preece shows up copied in several places on the internet, including the Genealogy.com website (<http://www.genealogy.com/forum/surnames/topics/price/14893/>) and on Find A Grave for William Martin Priest; see [1]

[5] There is an Enoch Cemetery, also known as Steiner Ranch Cemetery, close to the Preece land, but it's not clear at all this is what she is referencing. See <http://www.austintxgensoc.org/cemeteries/enochs-cemetery/>

[6] As noted already, William Martin Preece Sr. is not buried at the Preece Cemetery. He and wife are listed as buried at the Singleton Family Cemetery. Google Maps lists it as Post Oak Bend Cemetery, Marble Falls, TX 78654.

Posted by Dick O'Dennehy at 4:37 PM



Recommend this on Google

Labels: [Texas Ranger Dick Preece's "Comanche Trail"](#)

### 3 comments:



**Unknown** March 27, 2016 at 10:27 PM

Thank you for sharing all of this. I have started researching the Preece family. I recently found the Preece cemetery that my daddy told me about. He used to go there as a child. I remember hearing stories about how the Preece's handled the Civil War and reading your research has put light on family folklore. You have helped to bring my family history alive.

~Melissa Preece-Pendergraft

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**Melissa Pendergraft** March 27, 2016 at 10:33 PM

Dick was my 3rd great uncle

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▼ Replies



**Dick O'Dennehy**  March 28, 2016 at 7:09 AM

Thank you for getting in touch about the article. I've heard from some of the other Preece family as well. I first happened upon Dick Preece working on Bull Creek history in general and decided this was a family history that shed a lot of light on Travis



County and needed to be researched more. The story about Union resistance during the Civil War was in particular fascinating. I have ancestors that were "Unionists" as well and were living in Smithwick, Texas (and of course Noah Smithwick left Texas for California when the war broke out fearing for his life for opposing secession). My two ancestors wound up in the ranging companies that formed for "homeland protection" against Indians, outlaws, etc. as opposed to signing up for the Confederacy. Just a fascinating detail about the Civil War you hear so little about.

Would love to hear from any bits you might learn in your family research. If you go to the "About this Blog" tab there is an e-mail address ..

All the best - Rich Denney

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